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ABSTRACT

Different types of interviews serve different purposes; however, they all share a common goal of collecting data in different situations. The data may be factual in generating quantitative input for a research project, attitudinal in gauging public acceptance of a proposed educational policy, or used in gaining a better understanding of a certain organizational feature of an educational institution. The normal progression in the interview process is from using open-ended questions as ice-breakers to establishing rapport with the interviewee, followed by negotiating the format, scope and range of the questions. Many researchers distinguish types of interviews by the amount of structure used in the process. Effective use of interviewing in qualitative research has also been discussed by researchers. Types of interviews applicable to educational research include: standardized survey interviews, in-depth interviews, intensive interviews, the long interview, the focused interview, and interviews of elites. Given the culturally diverse and heterogeneous population, problems and biases are becoming more apparent. Variables in the interview process include: race, gender, age, educational level, and social status. Because of cultural and linguistic variables, different people attach different degrees of importance to the value, worth or intent of certain questions and answers. Treating interviews as discourses and speech events open a whole new area for further research. Contains 31 references. (RS)

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Interviewing in Educational Research:
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Introduction

Interviews have been described as purposeful conversations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982), communicative acts and processes (Briggs, 1986), and a form of discourse produced jointly between two people (Mishler, 1986). Within this framework, there are many different types, each serving a different purpose. For example, there are survey interviews, sales interviews, job interviews, research interviews, and many other kinds. They all share a common goal of collecting data in different situations. The data may be factual in generating quantitative input to a research project, attitudinal in gauging public acceptance of a proposed educational policy, or used in gaining a better understanding of a certain organizational feature of an educational institution. The situations for interviews may be as diverse as in gathering information for public opinion polls, studying different cultures through informants, or conducting educational research.

The Interview Process

In treating the interview as conversation, Werner and Schoepfle (1987) contend that the normal progression is from open-ended questions as an ice-breaker to establishing rapport with the interviewee, followed by negotiating the format, scope and range of the questions. These

negotiations will then establish the proper actors and contextual values such as time, space and the stage for the action, leading to closed questions that will elicit more useful information. However, as Bogdan and Biklen (1982) point out, closed questions that lead to more structure will result in comparable data across subjects, but at the expense of losing the opportunity to understand how interviewees interpret the topics at hand.

Many researchers such as Merriam (1988) distinguish types of interviews by the amount of structure used in the process, varying from highly structured to informal or conversational. The degree of structure must correspond to the intent of the interview. Within a given structure, there are also many variables that influence the interview process. These include personality and skill of the interviewer, attitudes and orientation of the interviewee, and the definition of the situation under study. Furthermore, whether open or closed, the questions may elicit information such as experience, opinion, feeling, knowledge, and demographic data.

In addition to the amount of structure in interview types, Fetterman (1989) lists informal and retrospective interviews. He says that structured and semi-structured interviews have explicit goals and are verbal approximations of questionnaires. The informal interview tends to have an implicit agenda aimed at identifying shared values among

certain groups. These may be difficult to conduct because of the possible loss of control by the interviewer over topics under discussion. The retrospective interview can have elements from any of the above. An additional observation that he makes concerning asking questions is that the answers to open-ended questions require interpretation whereas close-ended questions show behavior patterns of the interviewees.

Locus of control as mentioned above is in fact of major concern to Powney and Watts (1987). Instead of dividing interviews by the amount of structure, focus or depth, they partition interviews into respondent interviews and informant interviews. In respondent interviews, the locus of control is with the interviewer who guides by intentions, either expressed or implicit. In informant interviews, the goal is to gain insight into the perception of the interviewee within a given situation. In the latter case, the interviewer aids the respondent in articulating concerns and understandings.

In approaching interviews as conversation, Denzin (1989) breaks them down as scheduled standardized, nonscheduled standardized and nonstandardized. In the first type, all questions share the same wording with four assumptions concerning interviewers and interviewees: (1) they share a common vocabulary; (2) the questions are equally meaningful to all; (3) the context is identical; and

(4) the questions have been pretested. The nonscheduled standardized interview most closely approximates the focused interview (to be discussed later). The nonstandardized interview is an unstructured interview. Problems in conducting a successful interview include variations in the language used by the interviewer and the interviewee, the reluctance to answer questions and fabricated answers, and symbols and rules used in the interviewee's group. Gender may also enter as a filter to the knowledge gained.

Interviewing is viewed as a tool in qualitative research. As with any other tool, it must be used properly to be effective. Its usage in the toolbox of the qualitative researcher has been discussed recently by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) in that one must be flexible in responding to a given situation. In trying to accommodate both efficiency and effectiveness, Skopec (1986) brings about a situational perspective because different combinations of people, places and events create different settings for the interview situation. Direct questions, while more efficient, may bring about less cooperation because of differences in value systems, linguistic codes, biases, etc. between the interviewer and the interviewee. In order to bring about cooperation of the respondent and be more effective in eliciting answers, the interviewer may need to become less focused in the interview process and be less efficient.

Types of Interviews

The specific types discussed here are applicable to educational research. For example, Fowler and Mangione (1990) say that the standardized survey interview has the express purpose of producing quantitative data about a given population. In order to collect usable data, interviewer-related errors must be reduced by paying attention to interview techniques, the establishment of a proper context, design of the questions, and the training and supervision of interviewers. Brenner (1985b) further states that in survey research, the interviewer and the respondents must share the same linguistic code.

In-depth interview as discussed by Seidman (1991) is one type that can be used if the intent is not to get quantifiable answers but to understand the experiences of other people and the meanings they attribute to those experiences. He views this as a three-interview series starting with a life history to provide a context. This is followed by an interview on the concrete details of certain experiences. The third interview in the series is a reflection on the meanings of those experiences.

In a similar vein is the intensive interview. Brenner says that it is an "in-depth gathering of informants' explanatory speech material and its subsequent content analysis" (1985a, 149). Unlike the survey interview, information collected is a joint product of the

interpretation of the question by the respondent and the context in which it is asked.

This is similar to the long interview as explained by McCracken (1988) and the focused interview described by Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990). The long interview places a situation in its social and cultural context. It is a focused, highly intensive interview in which the interviewer must review relevant literature to establish categories and relationships among variables in constructing the questionnaire and the interview process. The focused interview is a type of research interview with the following characteristics: (1) the interviewee is known to have participated in a certain situation; (2) the researcher reviews necessary information in order to arrive at a provisional analysis; (3) the production of the interview guide is based on this analysis; and (4) the result of the interview is the interviewee's definition of the situation. The subsequent interviews are then focused to elicit subjective perceptions concerning pre-analyzed situations. Retrospection is used to encourage the interviewee to recall immediate reactions rather than to reconsider a situation. The four criteria for a successful focused interview are: (1) range to set boundaries in exploring a topic and related responses; (2) specificity in the number of details in attempting to close gaps between perceptions of a situation and reports about the situation; (3) depth in seeking

self-reported experiences and feelings toward those experiences; and (4) personal contexts to discover what each interviewee has brought into the situation.

The focused interview has been expanded to the focused group interview where the interviewer becomes a moderator and relies on the interaction and discussion among the interviewees (Morgan, 1988). The interaction also becomes a weakness in inhibiting comments from some participants or influencing opinions of others. Although the focused group interview has been used extensively in market research, Bers suggests that, in exploring images of educational institutions, it can "generate new insights and provide a deeper understanding of perceptions and behaviors" (1987, 19). She emphasizes that the focused group interview is best used to gauge attitudinal dimensions and gives examples from working with adult students at Oakton College. Lederman, in using the focused group interview to collect data in studying educational effectiveness, cautions that one of the assumptions made here, as true in many other types of interviews, is that interviewees "are capable of being good reporters" (1990, 118).

Related to the focused interview is the interviewing of elites described by Dexter (1970). Elite interviews differ from other types in that the focus is not on a given situation or environment but on the interviewee who possesses certain specialized knowledge that may not be

shared by the interviewer. The interviewer does not bound the interview. Instead, the interviewer stresses the interviewee's definition of the situation, encourages the interviewee to structure the event, and lets the interviewee introduce what is considered relevant. It is used with well-informed respondents such as accreditation team members, not the "rank-and-file of a population" (Dexter, 1970, 6). Because of the nature of the interview, the interviewer should research the background information necessary to understand the interviewee's assumptions, accommodate changes in circumstances, and refrain from asking questions to which the interviewer should know the answers (Peabody et al., 1990). This type of interviewing is in contrast to the ethnographic interview described by Spradley (1979) where the interviewee is the informant who interprets attitudes and values from his or her culture. The informant or the interviewee is the intermediary for the interviewer or researcher to elicit the needed information.

The different types of interviews should be viewed with Mishler's (1986) idea of the interview as a form of discourse as the backdrop. Four components must be considered: (1) the interview is foremost a speech event; (2) the discourse is jointly constructed by the interviewer and the interviewee; (3) the analysis and interpretation of the questions and answers are based on the theory of discourse and meaning; and (4) the meanings of the questions

and answers are contextually grounded. Unlike previous views of interviews as behavioral events, the interviews must be considered as linguistic events. In a similar vein, Briggs (1986) talks about how to ask questions in an interview. In considering the interview as producing data, previous research has moved away from the contextually sensitive issues of the speech event. He calls into question the biases associated with interviews. Their "removal" from the interview process may be problematic because the removal will not necessarily give the "true" meaning of the data. The bias may be a conscious distortion of a fact by the interviewee to bring certain perceived differences into the foreground.

Variables in the Interview Process

Given the present culturally diverse and heterogeneous population, problems and biases are becoming more apparent. These include the effects of variables such as race, gender, age, educational level, and social status. Devault (1990), for exampled, looks at linguistic aspects of interview practices and women. From a feminist perspective, language as used reflects the male experience. It is not only inadequate in describing women's experiences but is also inadequate when used by women to explain their experiences. In studying interviewers and respondents of both sexes, Lueptow, Moser and Pendleton (1990) conclude that females make better interviewers in eliciting more disclosure from

respondents. Male interviewers are seen as more threatening and elicit more conforming views, especially from female respondents.

Another important factor to consider is race or ethnicity. Most of the literature on interviewing reflect the black-white relationship. Shosteck (1977) reported that on items that are not racially related, answers from blacks to white interviewers show no significant difference from those given to black interviewers. However, on racially sensitive issues involving topics such as housing conditions or schools, blacks either do not answer or give muted answers or those that are socially acceptable to white interviewers. They show much more intense concern to black interviewers. However, answers from militant blacks show no major difference. Therefore, high militancy may be taken as an indicator that answers to questions may be consistent across interviewers. In another study by Schuman and Converse (1971) on racially sensitive issues, the results indicate that the level of militancy shown to both black and white interviewers may be dependent on the socioeconomic level of the respondent. The level of militancy among blacks seems to be more pronounced as they move down on the socioeconomic scale.

A frame-of-reference difference is apparent on a separate question concerning entertainers. Black respondents tend to name black entertainers when interviewed

by blacks, and white entertainers when interviewed by whites (Schuman & Converse, 1971). On other social issues, the level of reporting may also come into play. In studying voting behavior, Anderson, Silver and Abramson (1988) say that black respondents are more likely to report that they have voted to black interviewers when they actually did not vote. However, the turnout at the polls among blacks is higher if they are visited by a black interviewer before the election. In a separate, not race-related, study on reporting instances of medical procedures, Loftus, Klinger, Smith and Fiedler (1990) are able to reduce instances of overreporting by asking questions with two time frames of reference, once for the previous six-month period and then again for the previous two-month period when the actual data required is for the preceding two-month period.

Among other groups that have been studied are the Hispanics. Marin, Vanoss and Perez-Stable (1990) indicate that, at least in telephone survey interviews, the high rate of response may be due to cultural characteristics which value highly interpersonal relationships. However, in cases where the respondents may be undocumented migrant workers or the interviewers are perceived as working for the government, a highly structured instrument may be inappropriate. Instead, open-ended questions will allow the respondents to tell their stories (Cornelius, 1982).

In dealing with a different group, the Chinese Americans, Weiss (1977) has been able to establish his credibility because he is a teacher, a highly-regarded position within that culture. However, the locus of control is problematic because the respondents expect him to be committed to their positions on issues under discussion. He says that the major difference in dealing with a well-educated minority is that its members will read and comment on the research results. When the results differ from their beliefs, they may be less willing to cooperate in subsequent meetings.

One other group that comes naturally into educational research is children. While age, sex, socioeconomic level, and various other variables may all influence adult interviews, it is the interview setting that shapes a child's role as an interviewee (Parker, 1984). Factors that may influence adults less such as the shape of the room and the color of the walls in the interview setting influence children more. Children may also vary more in maturity needed to understand certain standardized questions. The refusal to answer in some instances may be due more to the inability to formulate an answer than unwillingness to supply an answer. Therefore, the interviewer must be more willing to accommodate these differences and make necessary adjustments.

Conclusion

As with any other tool, the interview as a research tool is becoming more complex as researchers delve into the variables governing this special type of discourse and expand the range of uses for the interview. It is also becoming apparent that the reality perceived by the interviewer may differ from that understood by the interviewee. Because of cultural and linguistic variables, different people attach different degrees of importance to the value, worth or intent of certain questions and answers. Treating interviews as discourses and speech events open a whole new area for further research.

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